

Mind the Gab: A Racial Rhetorical Criticism of an "Alt-Tech" Complaint Against "Big Tech" Content Moderation

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ABSTRACT This article analyzes the role of race in the branding rhetoric of the "free speech software company" Gab AI Inc. as found in the X/Twitter and blog posts promoting its products. This analysis aims to assess conservative anxieties about content moderation which drive the creation of alternative social media platforms like Gab. The article argues that the point of stasis, or core set of issues in a debate, in Gab's branding rhetoric between the company and its audience is a shared fantasy of white enslavement/abjection by the content moderation policies of "Big Tech" companies. This point of stasis is extended through three entangled racialized commonplaces: post-racial incorporation of Blackness, nostalgia for settler conquest, and techno-orientalist paranoia. The article analyzes the reciprocal relationship between these commonplaces and the point of stasis in Gab's branding rhetoric and concludes by reflecting on what Gab's aspiration towards white sovereignty in the platform economy entails for contemporary anticolonial and abolitionist praxis and scholarship on content moderation and alternative social media platforms.

KEYWORDS content moderation, critical platform studies, digital rhetoric, psychoanalysis, race

Introduction

The subject of this essay is the branding rhetoric of Gab AI Incorporated, a self-described "free speech software company."¹ Gab AI's mission is to "protect free expression, decentralize the web, and democratize access to information for all people, everywhere," in accordance with the spirit of the First Amendment.² The

company's primary product is Gab Social, a micro-blogging platform referred to by detractors as Twitter-for-racists, an insult no longer relevant given changes to X/Twitter content moderation policies and practices.³ Gab was the first of a wave of "alt-tech" free speech-oriented platforms like Parler and Bitchute promising an alternative to "Big Tech" platforms such as Meta's Facebook.⁴ Gab's complaint against "Big Tech" is a populist cliché adapted to the platform economy: content moderation on social media platforms unjustly censors The People's constitutionally sanctified free speech.⁵ As Ryan Kor-Sins argues, Gab's "platform branding," or how Gab "display[s] a holistic brand through their distinct contextual, linguistic, and technological features," is "entirely contingent on its positioning as an ally of alt-right and far-right groups, emerging as a reaction to a perceived threat of free speech on social media and working to show displaced alt-right users that they are both welcomed and 'exclusive' members on the platform."⁶ My concern in this essay is the racialization of this branding, as I argue that Gab not only hosts racist content, but also understands the threat to free speech in racialized terms.

I analyze the branding rhetoric of Gab as an avenue for evaluating conservative anxieties about content moderation as an issue of white agency/sovereignty in the platform economy. Such anxieties have driven the creation of multiple "alt-tech" platforms and the takeover of a prominent mainstream platform (X/Twitter).⁷ Drawing from critical race and ethnic studies, psychoanalysis, and rhetorical theory to engage critical platform studies, I evaluate how the rhetoric used to express anxiety over content moderation is mediated by race as a technology for imagining and making sense of user agency in the contemporary platform economy.⁸ Though the user as "a normative figure of subjective agency" is often implicitly assumed to be white as a "default setting for tech development," Gab's branding rhetoric is uniquely situated for analysis because the company must make the racialization of user agency explicit in order to generate socioeconomic value.⁹ While Gab's appeal is that it is an independent infrastructure not subject to advertiser expectations, shareholders, or other platform's content moderation

policies (given independent servers, payment processors, etc.), sustaining such isolation from the broader platform economy cuts off typical routes for generating revenue (advertising, selling information, and speculative capital).¹⁰ The company must convince its rogues gallery of the de-platformed to not only continue using the platform, but also potentially pay for subscriptions for “premium” features. This is a haphazard balancing act: while Gab must moderate because all “platforms must moderate, but disavow it” (such as Gab’s acquiescence to law enforcement, which it has in common with mainstream platforms), Gab must also show that its First Amendment-committed moderation is the best solution.¹¹ Gab’s branding must therefore provide an affectively compelling explanation of the workings and futures of platforms to keep users affectively/financially invested. As such, the perceived value of the platform to potential users depends on effective use of racial rhetoric to weave a collective racialized sociotechnical imaginary, or a shared fantasy of the value and development of technology shaped by symbolic and material racial violence.¹²

To unravel this imaginary, I perform a racial rhetorical criticism of Gab’s branding rhetoric through blog posts by CEO Andrew Torba on Gab News and posts on Gab AI Inc.’s now defunct Twitter account @getonGab. The Gab News blog posts advocate for Gab’s necessity through commentary and interpretation of news stories about the technology industry, while the X/Twitter account is built around a command (get on Gab) to potential patrons of the platform. The goal of this article is to evaluate the racialized worldview that justifies such a command. I identify the point of stasis, a rhetorical concept naming the common ground or central point of contention in a debate or broader deliberative discourse about a topic, that Gab stakes as common ground with their potential audience. I then analyze the argumentative commonplaces tied to this point of stasis to analyze the racial temporality of Gab’s branding, or how Gab’s rhetoric renders the past, present, and future through a racialized sociotechnical imaginary of the platform economy.

My central claim is that Gab appeals to users through fantasies of white abjection, or essentially imagined narratives in which white people are portrayed as oppressed victims thrust out of the social realm. Such fantasies sustain the desire for free speech through attachment to the figure of the white-user-in-chains as the subject who suffers from enslavement to Big Tech. The threat of white enslavement functions as a point of stasis, a rhetorical concept for evaluating the core issues in a debate which I read in this essay as “a symptom that might tell us something about the affective connections between audience and rhetor and the economy of desire that sustains them.”¹³ This point of stasis knots together three racialized argumentative commonplaces in Gab’s appeals which sustain an economy of desire sustained through racial anxieties about content moderation: post-racial incorporation of Black users, settler nostalgia for the Wild West Internet, and techno-orientalist paranoia about Asian technology industries. These commonplaces articulate, respectively, the present (surveillance and punishment), past (digital freedom/sovereignty), and future (platform despotism) of white abjection. Each commonplace contributes to a racialized sociotechnical imaginary that shapes the desire for platformed freedom/agency through an attachment to white racial sovereignty as the promise of an escape from mediation made sensible through the symbolic positioning of Blackness as non-communicability.¹⁴ The essay proceeds in three further sections: first, I articulate a psychoanalytic racial rhetorical approach to stasis and commonplaces, then analyze the commonplaces in Gab’s branding rhetoric, and conclude with remarks about the significance of Gab for the question of engagement with social media platforms.

Racial Fantasies Between Stasis and Commonplace

White Abjection as Point of Stasis

In this section, I argue that white abjection is a shared fantasy that operates as a point of stasis between Gab and its audience. I rely on stasis as a conceptual tool for rhetorical criticism (the analysis of public discourse and argumentation), whereas classic stasis theory aims at guiding speakers through inventing arguments. From Hermagoras through Cicero, stasis operates as a guide for rhetors to aid in the identification of core issues in a debate to establish common ground from which disagreement begins.¹⁵ For example, in a debate about climate change, if the speaker's opponent accepts that climate change is happening *but* claims it is not caused by fossil fuels, the speaker could deploy stasis theory to guide them to arguments about the defining characteristics of climate change. However, stasis takes on a different role for the rhetorical critic analyzing public discourse compared to the rhetor composing a public speech. As a critic, I retroactively derive emergent points of stasis around which public argumentation revolves, curating fragments of the deliberative process structured by power that evidence racialized affective attachment to the core issue(s) of disagreement.¹⁶ I evaluate Gab's appeals through the concept of stasis to apprehend what orients public deliberation over the contemporary platform economy. To generate value, Gab's complaint must be situated in a vision of what it means to exist as a (presumably white conservative) user in the often confusing and opaque complexities of the contemporary platform economy/ecology. The complaint is both singular as exaggerated branding but also necessarily draws from the same racialized commonsense that permeates mainstream deliberation about the future of technology. The core issues and arguments of Gab's rhetoric

offers one (strange yet exceedingly familiar) avenue through which to unpack the hullabaloo regarding content moderation.

My approach is informed by two recent interventions regarding stasis in rhetorical scholarship; the first proposes that Blackness is the constitutive outside to public debate and the second attends to the affective investments through which audiences determine what matters. Turning to the first, Amber Kelsie problematizes the understanding of stasis “as a hermeneutic for coming to consensus on the point of contention from which debate proceeds” by theorizing Blackness as the “(im)possible outside” of debate.¹⁷ If agonistic contestation in the arena of words is posed as the common ground of liberal democracy, Kelsie claims that Blackness is a disavowed negativity against which that common ground is formed, either thrust outside of the question of debate or incorporated through terms of order that seek to police and prohibit modes of Black expression that question such terms.

Kelsie argues that “the somewhat paradoxical relationship between consensus and dissensus found in stasis speaks to a kind of disavowal of ungroundedness” and that “refusing this disavowal of groundlessness as it emerges in contemporary figurations of agonistic debate might enable us to more accurately think of rhetoric in its modern inflection as the presupposition of a ground as a war against its own void via anti-Blackness.”¹⁸ For Kelsie, W. E. B. Du Bois’s account of the Civil War and Reconstruction illustrates the groundlessness of Blackness: “black liberation was never the terms on which the war was fought,” as the stasis found between North and South was over “competing concerns to limit the competition that black people posted to whites, both as slave labor and as free labor.”¹⁹ But “the waging of the General Strike” by slaves during the US Civil War functioned as “an incisive refusal to continue under the terms presented” which forced the hand of the North and broke Southern logistics, functionally resolving the war from *outside* civil society.²⁰ Kelsie further reads the failures of Reconstruction, the compromises and common ground found between the North

and South, as the re-elaboration of “black suffering through nominal emancipation;” “the resolution to war” established stasis through the effacement of Black liberation and mutation of Black subjection.²¹

The core issues of debate over content moderation are thus linked to this positioning of Blackness in/against public discourse. Stasis is not a simple question of core issues, as the possibility of agonistic democratic debate is rendered coherent by anti-Blackness. And as Ruha Benjamin indicates, when it comes to deliberation over the future of digital technology, “antiblack racism . . . is not only a by-product, but a precondition for the fabrication of such technologies—antiblack imagination put to work.”²² The emergent points of stasis in deliberation over the past, present, and future of the platform economy are—drawing on Benjamin and Tressie McMillan Cottom—entangled with a concurrent disavowal (through coded bias and imagined objectivity), expropriation (such as extraction of data), and incorporation (like predatory inclusion) of Blackness and Black users.²³ While one of the core issues of content moderation discourse in the United States (which is already to bracket the shifting international legal terrain US-based companies actively shape) is the arbitrary platform governance that fills in the gap between Section 230 and the First Amendment, Gab’s rhetoric instead relies on the gap between the initial promise of social media platforms and the violent processes of racial capitalism generative of value in the platform economy.²⁴ Gab’s branding appeals to the potential user’s desire for the preservation of personhood/speech rights through a fantasy of platformed freedom/agency that apprehends and narrates the happenings of content moderation on a terrain of argumentation already shaped by racial violence.

Gab’s complaint is therefore not just tied to the racist speech they wish to protect, but also the imposition of terms of order that prevent Black liberation and sustain the violence of racial platform capitalism. This requires a re-reading of the role of the First Amendment in debates about content moderation as a site for “the failures of Reconstruction” that Saidiya Hartman suggests “need to be located to

the very language of persons, rights, and liberties."²⁵ When situating Gab within Reconstruction's failures, the first place to start might be the first Ku Klux Klan represents the failures of Reconstruction as disgruntled Confederate veterans who paved the road to Jim Crow segregation through the violent suppression of Black political representation.²⁶ In that vein, Gab offers those who take up the first KKK's mission a technological bunker. But to follow Hartman more closely, the concept of liberal individualist personhood enshrined in the possession of the right to speech sanctifies enactments the symbolic violence of everyday racist speech, actively disarticulates the ground for collective liberation in political imagination by reducing it to individual expression and representation, and enacts surveillance of those deemed threats to democratic deliberation/national security. This is neither to discredit the tactical use of First Amendment rights, as with public protest, nor to advocate for expanded hate speech related legislation, but rather to highlight how the concept of personhood embedded in the First Amendment sustains the failures of Reconstruction. The fantasy of freedom through which stasis is achieved must be approached as built on a consecration of racial violence through both racist speech and economic/political order.

My approach to analyzing attachment to this shared fantasy is also informed by Calum Matheson's argument that affective investments in broader economies of desire are the "condition of possibility" for stasis.²⁷ Stasis does not just bind debaters through the common ground, but is "determined retroactively as a point of organization negotiated by . . . an audience that determines what matters."²⁸ That determination is bound to the weave of desire and language that makes an issue something that one puts energy and care into in the first place. In Gab's branding, the defense of free speech against content moderation operates as "the *krinomenon* [key issue] that stands in for a lack of agreement between two sides."²⁹ Free speech thus "makes up for an absence" between the divergent interests of Gab's CEO Torba and Gab's audiences (for example, between ostensibly color-blind Christian nationalism and explicit white nationalism).³⁰ Matheson utilizes this psychoanalytic inflection of stasis to explain how paranoid

conspiracy theorists like QAnon adherents might find common cause with Donald Trump.³¹ While Qanon believers and Trump might not share the same unconscious investments, they are attached through points of stasis established through signifiers such as "'Make America Great Again,' 'Drain the Swamp,' [and] even the public persona of Trump himself."³² Another example are Christian evangelicals who are at odds with Trump's vulgarity and lack of Christian piety but find common ground via the promise of MAGA and his reworking of the Supreme Court. Matheson's psychoanalytic approach offers attention to how racial anxieties engendered by audiences' collective imagination of content moderation could function as a condition of possibility for finding common ground with Gab's appeals.

My approach thus prioritizes the racialized affective attachments that are the condition of possibility for stasis as a shared fantasy that compels the user's desire for using the platform. I draw on Jacques Lacan's formulation of fantasy as an imagined narrativization of desire maintained by attachment to the object a, the object-cause of desire that supports the promise of agency in fantasy.³³ Gab's branding relies on free speech (which could be framed as an iteration of the drive object of *voice*) as the object a: *if only users were able to obtain (white) free speech, then they would be able to access the true pleasures and joys platforms promise.*³⁴ However, this does not account for the figure of the white man positioned within Gab's branding rhetoric as broken, derelict, functionally thrust out of the social order. Departing from Lacan and building on analysis of how white masculinity fantasizes about its own abjection to maintain hegemony, I claim the fantasy built through the argumentative fragments in Gab's branding constitutes an imagined relation between the platform user and free speech sutured together by the abject figure of the white-man-in chains.³⁵

The fantasy of abjection is not free floating as Gab's branding rhetoric is reliant on an analogy between whiteness and racial slavery which equivocates white men's imagined abjection to the structurally enforced abjection of anti-Blackness. The

threat of content moderation for Gab and its audiences is theft of the white man's freedom/personhood—a reduction to nothingness, a lack of voice and recognition, a social death in which one's speech is not legible or valid in public discourse. Drawing from Frank Wilderson's critique of the "ruse of analogy," I am suggesting that Gab's rhetoric relies upon a parasitic analogization between racial slavery and the suffering white men are imagined as experiencing at the hands of "Big Tech" in which the threat of content moderation becomes the fantasized inverse of what Kelsie articulates, as whiteness is imagined to be thrust outside of the realm of democratic possibility.³⁶ Racial slavery is rendered a referent for how white men experience the loosening of content moderation from the bounds of constitutionally sanctioned rights; not just hyperbole, but analogy only made coherent via persistent racial violence. For Gab, the key issue in the debate about content moderation isn't AI, labor, or specific policies/enforcement. Instead, a core anxiety Gab's rhetoric cannot help but return to is a shared fantasy of white enslavement to Big Tech.

The anxiety over free speech in Gab's rhetoric is tied to the impossibility for whiteness to escape its origin and entrapment in symbolic mediation and racial violence. Following Kalpana Seshadri, whiteness is an object of desire that promises sovereign humanness that can overcome and escape mediation.³⁷ Attachment to whiteness requires disavowal of its historicity, i.e. the history and ongoing processes of structural racial violence that produces whiteness as a signifier invested with meaning.³⁸ In Gab's branding, crises of free speech cut off access to a promised sovereignty by denying the possibility to publicly perform/enact, celebrate, and value white agency through speech. Racial anxiety undergirds the command "get on Gab:" *"get on Gab or be a slave."* The logic embedded in this command is critical to the platform's ethos, or the character/credibility offered to audiences by the rhetor, built through the repetition of this command to the imagined user of Gab. Gab establishes common ground with its potential user base by positioning itself as the only available digital protection against the enslavement of white life to the fact of content moderation.

In the next section, I outline how this established common ground is reaffirmed and extended through the branding rhetoric of Gab.

Racialized Commonplaces in Branding Rhetoric

In this section, I argue that the point of stasis Gab establishes with its audience is generative of and reinforced by racialized arguments made throughout its branding rhetoric. The arguments made throughout Gab's branding rhetoric build out and concretize the shared fantasy imperiled (white) platformed agency into a broader sociotechnical imaginary. The three patterns of racialized argumentation that I attend to in my analysis work as different mechanisms by which white abjection is elaborated upon. The *post-racial incorporation of Blackness* articulates the present of white abjection through content moderation, the *nostalgia for settler conquest* recalls a past of white freedom/digital sovereignty, and *techno-orientalist paranoia* projects an encroaching future of white enslavement to foreign power. The infrastructures of racial violence and historical contingencies from which these patterns of argumentation arise are distinct yet entangled, and in Gab's branding rhetoric, these commonplaces both come together around and extend the fantasies of white abjection that provide Gab and its audiences a point of stasis.

Such racialized argumentation is littered throughout Gab's X/Twitter posts and Gab News posts written by CEO Andrew Torba. From two snapshots of the X/Twitter account, I combed through 3,477 posts in total (made up of 1,568 retweets, 788 replies, 1,122 tweets) between December 4, 2018 through May 18, 2019 and July 29, 2019 through August 6, 2019 (Gab has since deleted their X/Twitter account). For the Gab News posts (on news.gab.com) I closely read 194 Gab News posts written by Andrew Torba (the CEO) from May 28, 2019 through February 24, 2024. I focused on posts written by Torba given that he is acting as a representative of the company, which is not the case for other blog writers. The corpus constructed between these two forms of branding is representative of

how Gab makes appeals to users to come to the platform and rationalizes staying on the platform. As Donovan, Lewis, and Friedberg argue, both the acts of coming to and staying on Gab are influenced by the practical necessity for a technical infrastructure hospitable to white nationalists after increased content moderation following the 2017 Unite the Right Rally, which indicates that Gab has to convince users that such an infrastructure *is* a solution.³⁹ My analysis focuses on the logic underlying how the platform portrays itself through X/Twitter and Gab News posts as a symptom of anxieties about content moderation rather than an empirical analysis of audience reception of marketing.

To demonstrate how I approach analysis, I'll use two tweets here in which the fantasy of white abjection is made explicit. The first references psychological enslavement: "Freedom on the internet is being crushed, to the applause of the elites and to the sheep who are mindlessly enslaved to them."⁴⁰ In Gab's rendering of content moderation, enslavement takes the shape of mind control by elites who manipulate a chunk of the masses into desiring unfreedom. The second poses content moderation as an attack on ownership of the self: "Tommy Robison [British white nationalist] is the latest to be 'unpersoned' from the internet. This should horrify everyone. If they can do it to Alex Jones, to Gab, and to Tommy Robinson, they can do it to you. It's time to break free from the chains of Silicon Valley"⁴¹ "Unpersoned" is a reference to George Orwell's *1984* in which an authoritarian state wipes somebody from existence for ideological disagreement. This invocation figures Silicon Valley platform governance as an authoritarian state. But unpersoning must be read alongside the metaphor of breaking free of Silicon Valley's chains—Gab's rhetoric portrays the present as a dystopia in which social media platforms have shackled white men, bending them to the will of the elites. Breaking free from chains is a repeated refrain.⁴² Content moderation is figured here as a form of social death, an excision from civil society by means of barring one from a right to digital mediation.

Gab's branding extends this fantasy of white abjection as a symptomatic site of the production and perpetuation of racial commonsense. While for economists, brands "are simply a form of information" about commodities on offer, they are also, as Douglas Holt argues, "ideological parasites" that become "powerful cultural symbols" as "because commodities materialize myths . . . allowing people to interact around these otherwise ephemeral and experientially distant myths in everyday life."⁴³ Following Dennis Mumby, "branding practices" incorporate "particular instantiations of the politics of common sense . . . reflecting particular practices of inclusion and exclusion."⁴⁴ This commonsense is woven through, drawing on Sarah Banet-Weiser, how Gab tells a story about content moderation to its customers through "the series of images, themes, morals, values, feelings, and sense of authenticity" that frame the platform's mission as "promise as much as a practicality."⁴⁵ And similarly to the neoliberal multicultural marketing that co-opts the rhetoric of intersectionality and Black social justice movements analyzed by Frances Sobande, Banet-Weiser, and Zoe Glatt that Gab is attempting to brand itself as different from, Gab's branding draws upon racial common sense built through the racialized mythology of American history/life.⁴⁶ Gab's racialized sociotechnical imaginary draws upon this mythos to suture gaps between the user, the promise of agency, and the complexities, violence, and material infrastructure of a global platform economy, or as Dalia Gebrial names it, "racial platform capitalism."⁴⁷

Gab's attempts to distinguish itself from competition by rhetorically harnessing racial common sense are necessary given that Gab has little more to offer. Gab has no unique features except for its content moderation policy and isolated infrastructure. The main sources of revenue for Gab are "donations, crowdfunding, and payments for premium subscriptions."⁴⁸ While premium subscriptions allow access to a few extra features, such as larger video uploads, a central motivation for subscription is the last feature listed in the description of Gab PRO: "Fighting against Silicon Valley tyranny."⁴⁹ Whereas platforms like Facebook have unique features and network effects to draw in new users not

invested in a vague mission to “help people connect,” belief in Gab’s mission drives its value.⁵⁰ This is particularly true since Gab forked the open-source, federated platform Mastodon; there’s little difference between spinning up a Mastodon server versus a Gab server other than the branding. There is no *unique* set of features that would compel a user to “get on Gab;” there is just Gab’s promise of the defense of (the white man’s) free speech expressed through racial common sense.

This racial common sense is expressed in racialized commonplaces. The arguments implied or made explicit in Gab’s posts congeal into and emerge from what rhetoricians call “topoi” or “commonplaces.” The concept originates in Aristotle’s topoi, or abstract guiding principles that act as “machines for making premises” (in goes a topic, out comes a premise).⁵¹ The concept has shifted reference point over time, as with commonplace books that worked as “linguistic storehouses” that “included quotations, examples, parallels, synonyms, epithets, aphorisms, and various trope and figures to be inserted into one’s own work.”⁵² Commonplaces could be seen as anything that aids in the invention of rhetoric; however, for the purpose of this essay, I take a narrow view of the racialized commonplace as specific lines and patterns of racialized argumentation that emerge in public discourse/debate.

Stasis and commonplaces have a reciprocal relationship. Commonplaces participate in the economy of desire that conditions attachment to core issues around which a discourse coheres by extending and sustaining fantasy relations to the issues, and concurrently, stasis is generative of commonplaces. In prescriptive stasis theory, identifying stasis directs the rhetor to relevant commonplaces. As Michael Hoppman writes, “most classical stasis models provide a specialized set of topoi . . . which guide the accuser in his or the defending in her search for applicable arguments.”⁵³ For example, if the point of stasis is the question of commitment, i.e. “did the person commit the act,” arguments could draw from commonplaces about signs the person committed

the act, the motivation for committing the act, or suspicious behavior before, during, or after the alleged act.⁵⁴ While classical models guide inferences in composition and posit a one-way street (stasis → commonplace), I focus on the reciprocity between stasis and commonplaces (stasis ↔ commonplace). I trace the racialized topology (recalling both topoi and Lacan's turn to topology) through which commonplaces used in making arguments for user agency are knotted together through the figure of the white-user-in-chains.⁵⁵

My method for identifying commonplaces is dependent on my judgment of what significant patterns emerge through the rhetorical fragments littered through @getonGab's feed and Torba's posts on Gab News. The posts I curate exemplify patterns of argumentation that draw from racialized tropes and figures rather than other topics, such as references to Bitcoin as "free speech money."⁵⁶ In the next section, my analysis unravels entangled racial rhetorics crystallized into a constellation of commonplaces that loop back to the stasis point of white enslavement while also flexibly extending this racial fantasy into a broader racialized sociotechnical imaginary. I do not presume the rhetorical fragments I've gathered are a representative sample of Gab's overall racialized argumentation. For example, I do not directly address antisemitic rhetoric in this article, which is a critical part of Gab's branding that is relatively subdued in the X/Twitter posts and blog posts I collected. While I have previously addressed how white nationalist antisemitic fantasies of a crisis in free speech are used to make sense of digital platforms, in this essay, I focus on the three aforementioned patterns of argumentation to draw out the touchstones of racial commonsense Gab's rhetoric shares with the "mainstream" of US-based public discourse on political issues related to the platform economy.⁵⁷ As is demonstrated in the next section, race is used as a symbolic resource in argumentation throughout Gab's branding, extending and amplifying anxieties over the potential barring of white voices from the platform economy.

The Racial Topology of Gab's Complaint

Post-Racial Incorporation of Blackness

The first commonplace is the post-racial incorporation of Blackness, in which Gab portrayed itself as post-racial through the tokenization of Black conservatives and equivalences between anti-Blackness and content moderation. By “post-racial,” I mean racial rhetoric shaped by the premise that a given nation (or the world more generally) has overcome racism.⁵⁸ The mythos of post-racialism posits that race has become a neutral signifier of difference, institutional/structural racism is overcome and therefore irrelevant/nonexistent, and speaking of racism is divisive/irrational as racism has been contained to the individual extreme hatreds of a few.⁵⁹ Consider the following retweet: “In the future society will look back on the Big Tech companies censoring conservatives for posting ‘hate speech’ (facts, opinions, or jokes that don’t align with the liberal establishment) the same way we look back on those who refused service to Black people in restaurants.”⁶⁰ Not only has anti-Blackness been contained as a past artifact of Jim Crow segregation, contemporary content moderation of anti-Black speech is equated to segregation. The post-racial is symbolically doubled; not only has racism been overcome, but it has been overcome to the point that moderating racist content is *like* segregation.

Gab engages in post-racial rhetoric to differentiate its value from mainstream social media platforms, as in a blog post titled “Gab Doesn’t Have a Diversity Officer and We Never Will” in which Torba poses a contrast between Gab and Facebook, which had just “elevated” the role of chief diversity officer Maxine Williams in the company after the 2020 uprisings.⁶¹ For Torba, “diversity officers aren’t ever concerned with or focused on diversity of thought, diversity of ideas, or diversity of beliefs,” but are instead concerned with “filling job positions . . .

based on the color of someone's skin," which should be seen as "inherently racist" rather than "endorsed, praised, and embraced."⁶² In contrast, Gab is a platform where race has no bearing in decision making, as "the color of someone's skin doesn't have anything to do with defending our mission of empowering everyone to speak freely online."⁶³ The free speech platform is posed as the true medium of "diversity of thought and the growth of new ideas."⁶⁴ Gab's post-racial rhetoric diverges from its white nationalist audience because it is courting a broader conservative audience by embracing the commonsense of post-Civil Rights conservative racial rhetoric.

Gab's branding also uses content moderation and free speech to figure a shared condition of victimization between white and Black social media users. An example Gab frequently drew upon in 2019 was Black conservative influencer Candace Owens, who is used to suggest that content moderation policy has gone too far, as in the retweet about how "@YouTube has restricted the latest episode of The Candace Owens Show. Two Black people discussing the issues facing the Black community is something young people are supposed to be protected from? Why would YouTube put this in restricted mode?"⁶⁵ The moderation of Owens's content, which often utilizes common anti-Black discussions of policy such as "claiming that liberal policies incentivizes fatherless homes," is posed as a case of extremity: *even* a Black conservative saying the things that white conservatives say about Black people has been moderated, which poses this moderation as a form of generalized discrimination against conservatives.⁶⁶ Gab uses the moderation of Black conservatives, as in another retweet about how the removal of Antonia Okafor from YouTube's Partner Program was an example of "Social Media Giants . . . silencing anyone who doesn't fully buy into their leftist bullshit," to create content moderation as a universalized problem.⁶⁷

On the other end, Gab has posted and retweeted stories about Facebook moderating the content of Black activists speaking about anti-Blackness. Two such headlines are "Facebook While Black: Users Call It Getting 'Zucked,' Say

Talking About Racism Is as Censored as Hate Speech" and "Facebook Admits It Often Confuses Advocacy and Commentary on Racism and White Complicity In Anti-Blackness with Attacks on a Protected Group."⁶⁸ In the context of Gab's feed, such posting creates an equivalence between conservatives facing moderation for anti-Black comments and Black people who speak against anti-Blackness. The problem with Black Facebook users' moderation is not the specific targeted content or why it was targeted, but the fact of moderation itself. Gab thus relies on anti-Black violence to market itself not only as a bunker for anti-Black jouissance, but through post-racial incorporation of Blackness as proof of the white man's abject condition: *we are treated the same as you*.

Gab's post-racial rhetoric depends on tokenism, strategically highlighting and emphasizing the existence of Black users as proof of the platform's innate post-racial constitution. Tokenism is "one strategy by which texts authorize people whose difference . . . if politicized and collectively articulated might pose a threat to a dominant order in which some groups are kept subordinate to others."⁶⁹ Gab's tokenism "glorifies the exception" by highlighting Black Gab users to obscure the platform's broader promise of functioning in the platform economy as a digital safe space for Nazis.⁷⁰ In one blog post, Torba attempts to refute New York Times reporting that "referred to Gab as a 'haven for racist memes and content'" by referencing a Gab post featuring a Black woman taking a selfie who identifies as a "Christian Trumplican in a Blue State" who is "done with FB and Twitter censoring my POTUS!"⁷¹ Torba claims that "at the time of publication" that post was "one of the top trending posts"; a Black woman's selfie here "metonymically represents a larger cultural grouping" as a token exchanged within discourse about content moderation.⁷² There is no further argument from Torba about the extent to which there is a Black user base, as a single trending post is held as proof that there is no racism on Gab.

Gab also tokenizes by strategically highlighting the incorporation of Black members of the Republican Party as a refutation of the charge of racism. In a blog

post, Torba welcomes Allen West, then-chairman of the Texas GOP, to Gab “just days after liberal subversives who have invaded the Texas GOP voted in favor of deplatforming themselves from Gab.”⁷³ The post came after the rejection of Gab as antisemitic by Texas Governor Greg Abbot. In the context of this intra-Texas GOP squabble regarding platforms for their membership, Torba’s post strategically poses West’s first Gab post about “the demon of critical race theory that is infecting our schools, culture, and government” as indication that Abbott is incorrect in rejecting Gab.⁷⁴ In another blog post, Torba republishes an op-ed written by Gab user and Pennsylvania Republican politician Kathy Barnette.⁷⁵ In the op-ed, Barnette mobilizes a Frederick Douglass quote about the struggle for freedom to justify narratives of white victimization, such as highlighting a story of “a young white man . . . being taunted and recorded by a Black man.”⁷⁶ While Torba has also welcomed members of Congress such as Paul Gosar and Matt Gaetz in specific Gab News posts, West and Barnette are the only figures who a) get their own posts despite not having been elected to a major political position and b) have republished writing in which they denounce anti-racist rhetoric. It appears that the ticket to being valorized by Gab for Black conservative politicians is rhetoric accepting the victimization/abjection of white men as a central issue in political discourse. Post-racial incorporation functions by figuring the present through a comparison that either creates an equivalence between anti-Blackness and white abjection or through tokenization of Black users who affirm Gab’s views.

Nostalgia for Conquest

Next, Gab uses the language of conquest to articulate a nostalgic attachment to the lost past of the free Internet, with evocation of conquest meant to save white men from their abjection and enslavement by Big Tech. In assuming the role of preserving the First Amendment of the Constitution, Gab’s complaint figures what it takes to seize freedom through what Tiffany Lethabo King calls “conquistador

humanism," or "the crafting and sustaining of European human life and self-actualization through Black and Indigenous death."⁷⁷ Gab imagines platformed agency and self-actualization through the fantasy of conquest (now reenacted on "cyberspace"). To be clear, I am not analogizing Gab's aims with the aims of past settlers on the basis that "cyberspace" is land to be conquered just like the Americas. Rather, the fantasy of digital space *as space*, as a site for property/sovereignty, depends on a cartographic fantasy that erupts as both a salve and a production of "the anxiety produced by the tenuous and always incomplete project of conquest."⁷⁸

For example, in a Gab News post titled "It's Time to Burn the Ships of Traditional Media," Torba makes the case for embracing alternative media platforms by viewing the lesson of Tucker Carlson's departure from Fox News through the metaphor of "burning the ships."⁷⁹ The metaphor is derived directly from the story of "Spanish conquistador Hernan Cortes" arriving "in the New World with a mission to conquer the Aztec Empire."⁸⁰ Torba describes how Cortes "eliminated any possibility of retreat and forced his men to fight for victory or death" by burning the ships of men who "were afraid" and "not sure that they could succeed in their mission."⁸¹ For Torba, "this act of burning the ships became a symbol of determination and commitment."⁸² Torba produces Gab's ethos through symbolic orientation: turning away from return to the Old World and towards the genocidal violence of conquering the New World. The turning toward embraces the grit and determination of the conquistador whose violence produces the digital sovereignty that Gab's branding must symbolically produce as lost to create Gab's value.

Traditional media is the path to the decaying Old World that the Gab user is cutting off through the act of getting on Gab. To get on Gab is to rekindle the fire of a conquistador subjectivity that can conquer "a new media landscape, one that is more decentralized and less reliant on traditional media outlets."⁸³ Having the "courage, determination, and willingness" to "read independent blogs, watch

independent news channels, use independent platforms, and listen to independent podcasts" is how the newly made conquistador can "take an active role in seeking the truth" and "creat[ing] a better future for ourselves."⁸⁴ The branding rhetoric pulls sleights of hand throughout this post, as mediation is figured as sovereignty as platforms become *terra nullius*, the fiction Jodi Byrd describes as the "paradigmatic uninscribed, uninhabited earth" that works as a "convenient colonial construct that maintained lands were empty of meaning, of language, of presence, and of history before the arrival of the European."⁸⁵ The future Gab heralds is uncharted territory in which the search for the truth can inscribe meaning and presence by figuring the production/maintenance of technical infrastructure as seizure of a space for white sovereignty.

The language of conquest was central in the roll out of Dissenter, which began as a browser extension for creating a comment section on any web page and eventually became a web browser with said extension after being banned from Google Chrome and Firefox. Dissenter's goal is to get around corporate news media moderation of the comment section—being able to comment conservative platitudes is the freedom Dissenter offers. Dissenter's branding drew upon the idea of "the Wild West Internet," in which Gab is imagined as rejuvenating a pioneer ethos following the fall of the Internet: "Gab is a perfect example of doing something to fix a problem. They're the real Americans who, 'Go West' and make their fortune, only now the west is 'Cyberspace, where they're staking out their future."⁸⁶ Overcoming content moderation is figured as preserving something essential to the American spirit, a self-actualization found through an entrepreneurial conquest of space. Dissenter thus returns the Internet and user to a prior state: "#Dissenter brings the wild west back to the internet. The way it was meant to be. It's absolutely glorious." Another tweet states "The wild west internet is back, and there's absolutely nothing Silicon Valley can do about it."⁸⁷ Silicon Valley is figured as a barrier to such a return, in the classic set up of the nostalgic fantasy of recuperating loss: *if only [x] didn't take it away, [y] would be mine as it used to be when things were good.* "The internet was always the wild west. Then

Silicon Valley changed that. Not anymore.”⁸⁸ The fantasy of past conquest renewed, of a heroic return to the processes of US military forces and settlers conquering the American West in the name of empire, resolves and overcomes the gap between mediation and sovereignty, such that a conquistador subjectivity is imagined to be enacted via the protected digital mediation Gab provides.

Nostalgia for the Wild West Internet shapes how Gab and its users imagine the development of the contemporary platform economy from the position of the user. One retweeted post reads: “@getongab This has always been a concern of mine. The Internet was originally conceived to be an endless digital frontier where everyone could carve out their own little corner. But with the globalization of the technology, it’s becoming a walled in digital Disney World.”⁸⁹ Consider how the Internet is mythologized here. After the West, after the Pacific, after space, we come to the Internet as a frontier that unfolds with no end. What is lost with “globalization” (here meaning the supposed expansion of platforms to, presumably, the non-white world of the Global South) is the freedom of a place of one’s own found in an infinite playground of conquest now enclosed by the corporation. Competition between tech companies is thus imagined through American history: “There’s a very clear civil war for the internet now happening at the browser extension level. On the one hand: Dissenter brings back freedom and the wild west internet. On the other: Jigsaw and NewsGuard create a corporate safe space where elites control the narrative.”⁹⁰ Jigsaw, an independent subsidiary of Google, had put out Tune, a browser extension “meant to make our online browsing experience a little bit nicer by freeing it of toxic comments,” and NewsGuard is a browser extension that provides “reliability ratings for news and information sources to help users make decisions about which news sources to trust—and avoid misinformation and disinformation.”⁹¹ To portray competition between Tune, NewsGuard, and Dissenter as a civil war does not replay the clash of South and North, but rather rhetorically juxtaposes the mythic spirit of the US West to the anxious decadence of coastal corporate elites. The debate over content moderation is imagined as between the unleashed freedom of endless

conquest versus the consolidation of power over speech in a decaying elite corporate form. The nostalgic fantasy of renewed conquest solidifies the promise of joy in using Gab to escape control.

Techno-Orientalist Paranoia

The last commonplace is techno-orientalist paranoid fantasies, in which Gab's rhetoric warns potential users of an invasive Asiatic force behind Big Tech entrancing innocent white US citizens through hypnotic technological mind control. Techno-orientalism is "the phenomenon of imagining Asia and Asians in hypo- or hypertechnological terms in cultural productions and political discourse."⁹² As a "discursive cultural phenomenon," techno-orientalism associates technology and a fantasized Orient to "reinforce the image of a culture that is cold, impersonal and machine-like, an authoritarian culture lacking emotional connection to the rest of the world."⁹³ While techno-orientalism scholarship initially focused on discourses about the 1980s Japanese tech industry, Lok Siu and Claire Chun indicate that techno-orientalist discourses now also "provoke fears of a future global market . . . economically driven by Chinese consumptive desires and practices."⁹⁴ Similar to how Frantz Fanon framed antisemitic fantasy as positioning Jewish people as subversive racial competitors, familiar yellow peril narratives of insidious Asian influence are run through the site of market competition in the tech industry.⁹⁵ Gab's techno-orientalism is particularly paranoid, given that Asian states are figured as a shadowy force whose trickery/subversion are swallowing up the white user of digital platforms. Paranoia is a structure of fantasy in which "beyond any reason the paranoiac 'knows' that another person, or more abstractly a force, has 'got it in for him.'"⁹⁶ In Gab's branding, the white user is unwittingly captured into a digital slavery by authoritarian Asians who cannot understand freedom as the result of racialized loss in market competition, which can be resolved via the user's show of agential capacity in financially backing Gab's fight against an Asiatic Internet.

Gab's paranoid fantasies portray China as a figure of comparison and competition, as in retweets of headlines referencing Chinese content moderation, such as "China blocked Wikipedia in all languages earlier this week."⁹⁷ The logic of Gab's comparison melds contemporary US geopolitical competition with China and Russia, Cold War anti-communist propaganda, and a fervent belief in the US as the land of constitutionally-guaranteed free speech: "The four different internets of the coming decade: China: censored, controlled entirely by the state. Russia: censored, controlled mostly by the state. The EU: censored, controlled by unelected globalists. America: free and open, powered by The People."⁹⁸ Chinese digital platforms certainly enforce stringent legally regulated content moderation policies, but, following Maximillian Mayer, to read this as a being "purely described through a register of control" ignores the "three-way interplay between party-state, platform companies, and citizen-consumers," such that the narrative of dystopian nightmare that "media reports routinely express when looking at China's digital advancements neither allow for an objective account nor generate productive insights."⁹⁹ For example, while TikTok is seen in American discourses as a tool of the Chinese state (or as Torba puts it, "Chinese spyware"), Zongyi Zhang illustrates a nuanced negotiation of power between the state and the platform in which the state intentionally makes "regulatory concessions."¹⁰⁰

Beyond comparing US-based freedom to Asiatic despotism, Gab's branding figures the Asian despot as a shadowy figure lurking behind Big Tech: "Silicon Valley sold you and your data out to the Chinese and the Saudis."¹⁰¹ Paranoia, in which "the paranoid person *observes clear signs* that the Other is driven by a malevolent plan, of which he or she as a person is the victim" and mediation "is invaded by a maddening force of which the subject is the mere object," emerges in this discourse in the fantasy of China as behind Silicon Valley.¹⁰² Gab positions the Chinese state as puppet master of American firms by strategically highlighting the transnational operations of transnational corporations, as in retweeted posts about Chinese influence on Google: a post from former Google employee turned Gab-advocate saying "When I arrived, they were pulling out of China because

censorship, when I left, they were trying hard to get back in"; a headline about "Google censoring VPN review sites on its China ad platform"; another headline about Google blocking "China adverts for sites that help bypass censorship"; and yet another headline about Google "Conducting a Secret 'Performance Review' of Its Censored China Search Project."¹⁰³ When these posts/headlines are put in the context of Gab's broader branding, they signal paranoid anxieties about American-based platform companies attempting bending the knee to the Chinese state.

Paranoid fantasies offer Gab's audience an imagined drive/motivation behind the calculus of Chinese businesses interacting with Western tech markets: "It's the oligarchs of Silicon Valley, the little tyrants who bend over backwards for their Communist Chinese Party masters, against We The People."¹⁰⁴ In one tweet, Gab highlights how "Apps that Tencent (basically the Chinese government) has ownership in: Epic Games (Fortnite)/ Supercell (Clash of Clans and many other top mobile games) / Discord/ Reddit /Snapchat/ TikTok/ Activision Blizzard/ The Chinese have the attention of your children more than you do. Bad!"¹⁰⁵ Anxieties about children and media are not new, but the twist in Gab's story is how Chinese investment is read as infiltration leading to loss of control: "The Chinese government is subverting the United States of America by investing billions and buying up American tech, social media, communications, travel, and gaming services that all of your kids (and you yourself) use daily for hours on end./Why is no one talking about this?"¹⁰⁶ The specifically *paranoid* techno-orientalist fantasy doesn't just utilize Chinese relationships to technology to make sense of Western digital futures, but instead sees Chinese control as the future of the Western Internet (if users don't get on Gab). The combination of yellow peril tropes and techno-orientalist discourse appeals to Gab's audience by amplifying anxieties about who is behind big Tech's content moderation.¹⁰⁷

Gab's paranoia extends to other Asian states, which are similarly figured as shadowy influence subverting American corporations. In the tweet, "Gab-

America/ Apple- China/ Google- China/ Facebook- The EU/ Twitter- Saudi Arabia/ Snapchat- Saudi Arabia/ Don't @ me," Saudi investments in Twitter and Snapchat signal foreign influence by an authoritarian Asian government.¹⁰⁸ A reference to Elon Musk's compliance with "the Turkish government's request to censor political content during their elections" reaffirms Gab's mission to protect the First Amendment: "if the content is legal in the United States it's legal on Gab and it's not being removed. There is absolutely nothing that foreign governments can do [sic] force an American company to comply with foreign speech laws."¹⁰⁹ In these references to Asian states, Gab's value lies in refusal "to comply with demands from governments," which has apparently "garnered respect and support from individuals who value open discourse and it has become a symbol of resistance against censorship."¹¹⁰ Torba also expresses anxiety about Asian tech workers, as "American values are foreign to Silicon Valley because three-quarters of Silicon Valley workers are from foreign countries with foreign values. Would American workers unilaterally censor fellow Americans at the behest of a corporation? Perhaps, but there would undoubtedly be a few more dissenters and whistleblowers" in an article about how "Gabbers are not just 'users.' They are our shareholders, customers, donors, volunteers, and warriors."¹¹¹ The value of the (implicitly white conservative) Gab user to Gab's CEO is rhetorically manifested through differentiation from the Asian tech workers whose "foreign values" threaten white digital sovereignty. These references to Asian tech authoritarianism are drawn together as a foreboding vision of a future Internet. Through this commonplace, Gab portrays the global market as a stage of racial competition, a war of racial survival that Gab is fighting against tyrannical Asiatic platform governance to save the empire from inevitable downfall. And of course, all that a potential Gab user has to do to contribute to this desperate mission to save white free speech from a subversive and shadowy Asiatic horde is exercise their sovereign agency by purchasing a subscription to Gab PRO.

Conclusion

Three scholarly implications arise from my analysis. First, a racial rhetorical approach to the sociotechnical imaginaries through which platforms are figured could prove fruitful when applied without generalization and with close attention to the particularity of contexts outside of US-based platforms. For example, Gab's First Amendment-driven imaginary is not universal; users from the Global South/of the global majority have different coordinates of imagining the goals and uses of platforms often no less detached from the mythos of Western Man given that platforms are situated by discourses of modernization/development.¹¹² An approach attentive to local/regional/transnational racial rhetorics could avoid automatic declarations of such users' desires as necessarily decolonial or resistive. Second, Gab's follies are what is at stake in ignoring the racialization of capital in scholarship on alternative social media.¹¹³ Alternative social media are not necessarily counterhegemonic because they contest corporate social media, as colorblind/post-racial co-option of anti-capitalist rhetoric is rather easy given the user's assumed default setting as white. Third, otherwise incisive scholarship on content moderation and racism is often limited by aims to make platform governance better as an anti-racist or decolonial first step.¹¹⁴ But if platform governance is sutured to racial violence and, as Sarah Roberts has shown, commercial content moderation depends on outsourcing to underpaid/exploited workers in the Global South who experience psychic violence from the work, then scholarship might be retooled to aim at practical aid for marginalized users (for example, Palestinian users targeted post-10/7) who must either take up the mantle of volunteer moderator, navigate/combat content moderation policies antagonistic to their occupation of the position of "user," or put activist pressure on platform governance structures.¹¹⁵

More practically, it is quite easy to dismiss Gab as a marginal/fringe platform for racist losers, which might lead a reader to suggest that ***of course the way they***

think about free speech is racist, they're literally Nazis. My response can't be *well actually, Torba's a Christian Nationalist, not a Nazi!* A more appropriate rejoinder might be that the rhetorical moves the company makes are not unique to Gab. I'll offer a few examples: zero-sum competition with China is a core bipartisan tenant of US platform regulation policy deliberation, the frontier myth is regularly referenced in Silicon Valley ideology, and tokenizing Black content creators is a common public relations tactic of large social media corporations. Rather than a complete break from "mainstream" US political discourse about platforms and policy, Gab is an exaggerated amplification of racial commonsense that can resonate with its potential user base precisely because Gab's logic begins from such commonsense about the role and function of media technology (i.e. to preserve white racial sovereignty).

Reading Gab as a symptom of racial anxieties coursing through public discourse in the US is also not advocacy for recentering public discourse to proper points of stasis from which "we" could proceed to an actual debate about the future of content moderation to make for an ethical platform economy. Instead, Gab's relationship to "mainstream" commonsense demonstrates that the company's quixotic pronouncements of itself as an outlaw vanguard heralding a new platform economy could be used as a point of reflection for those mobilizing in various ways against the current situation. Gab's attempts at "resistance" to the status quo is not some kind of false consciousness of the user who must instead be made conscious of the true source of their common exploitation by Big Tech, but instead an active extension of racial logics shaping how the platform economy is made sensible and transparent in public discourse. To put it more bluntly, while Gab has a clear target demographic, the presumption that "we are all enslaved by Big Tech" (or variations that might not use the "enslavement" metaphor explicitly, but aim for a shared notion of suffering as the basis for a kind of consumer revolt against the platform economy) is shared quite widely by those who do not identify as "white conservative men." As such, the hunch I'll offer in lieu of an elegant last sentence is that a minor necessity of the current situation is an amplification and

cultivation of rhetorical practices that can dislodge and reroute desires for corporate (or peer-based) recognition/mediation of the user as a figure of collective human sovereignty as such desires emerge in and shape the pathways and avenues of anticolonial and abolitionist organizing and advocacy.

Notes

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